

Handling Suspicious Letters or Packages

Letters containing *Bacillus anthracis* (anthrax) have been received by mail in several areas in the United States. In some instances, anthrax exposures have occurred, with several persons becoming infected. To prevent such exposures and subsequent infection, all persons should learn how to recognize a suspicious package or envelope and take appropriate steps to protect themselves and others.

Identifying Suspicious Packages and Envelopes

The following are some characteristics of suspicious packages and envelopes

- Inappropriate or unusual labeling
 - Excessive postage
 - Handwritten or poorly typed addresses
 - Misspellings of common words
 - Strange return address or no return address
 - Incorrect titles or title without a name
 - Not addressed to a specific person
 - Marked with restrictions, such as “Personal”, “Confidential”, or “Do not x-ray”
 - Marked with any threatening language
 - Postmarked from a city or state that does not match the return address
- Appearance
 - Powdery substance felt through or appearing on the package or envelope
 - Oily stains, discolorations, or odor
 - Lopsided or uneven envelope
 - Excessive packaging material such as masking tape, string, etc.
- Other suspicious signs
 - Excessive weight
 - Ticking sound
 - Protruding wires or aluminum foil

If a package or envelop appears suspicious, **DO NOT OPEN IT.**

Handling of Suspicious Unopened Packages or Envelopes

At any time a package or envelope is received that appears suspicious, these instructions should be followed

- Do not shake or empty the contents of any suspicious package or envelope.
- Do not carry the package or envelope, show it to others or allow others to examine it.
- Put the package or envelope down on a stable surface; do not sniff, touch, taste, or look closely at it or at any contents which may have spilled.
- Alert others in the area about the suspicious package or envelope. Leave the area, close any doors, and take actions to prevent others from entering the area. If possible, shut off the ventilation system.

- WASH hands with soap and water to prevent spreading potentially infectious material to face or skin. Seek additional instructions for exposed or potentially exposed persons.
- If at work, notify a supervisor, a security officer, or a law enforcement official. If at home, contact the local law enforcement agency.
- If possible, create a list of persons who were in the room or area when this suspicious letter or package was recognized and a list of persons who also may have handled the package or letter. Give this list to both the local public health authorities and law enforcement officials.

Threat Assessment for Letters Containing Powdery Substance

When a letter containing possible anthrax is found, it is important to assess the nature of any possible exposure. These factors will allow for the assessment of the credibility of the threat and whether the exposure might result in inhalational anthrax or cutaneous anthrax.

High Level of Threat

- There is a threatening message with the powder or substance.
- The substance is brown or sandy-brown rather than stark white.
- A suspicious letter or package is involved

Lower Level of Threat

- A white powder is found without a note, where one might expect someone to have spilled sugar, flour, etc.
- A white powder comes in an envelope with expected mail that is easy to trace to the sending source.

Risk-based Medical Management

High-credibility exposure situations

- If the situation suggests real potential for inhalational exposure (e.g., got a face and nose full of powder), consider starting prophylactic antibiotics and continuing them until exposure has been ruled out. If the powder is not available for testing, limited environmental testing of the site where the powder was released (e.g., where the envelope or package was opened) will likely be more sensitive and useful than collecting a nasal swab.
- If the situation suggests real potential for cutaneous exposure (e.g., direct hand contact with brownish powder), provide reassurance and counseling about the signs and symptoms of cutaneous anthrax and wait to start prophylactic antibiotics until culture of the powder is complete. Nasal swab testing is not recommended.

Low-credibility exposure situations

- If no clear-cut exposure, provide reassurance to the patient about the rarity of infection without known exposures. Nasal swabs and prophylactic antibiotics are not recommended.

- If the only potential exposure to a powder/suspicious substance is cutaneous, provide advice on what to look for (red spot -> papule -> vesicle -> black center over several days to a week), reassure them that cutaneous anthrax can be readily diagnosed and easily treated. There are not recommendations to collect nasal swabs or blood for serology in the absence of a skin lesion, nor are prescribing antibiotic prophylaxis recommended.

Decontamination After Spill

- DO NOT try to CLEAN UP the powder. COVER the spilled contents immediately with anything (e.g., clothing, paper, trash can, ect.) and do not remove this cover!
- Then LEAVE the room and CLOSE the door, or section off the area to prevent others from entering.
- WASH your hands with **soap and water** to prevent spreading any powder to your face.
- Next...
 - If you are at HOME, report the incident to the local police.
 - If you are at WORK, report the incident to local police, and notify your building security official or an available supervisor.
- REMOVE heavily contaminated clothing as soon as possible and place in a plastic bag, or some other container that can be sealed.
- SHOWER with **soap and water** as soon as possible. *Do not use bleach or other disinfectant on your skin.*
- If possible, list all people who were in the room or area, especially those who had actual contact with the powder. Give this list to both the local public health authorities so that proper instruction can be given for medical follow-up, and to law enforcement officials for further investigation.